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ABSTRACT

American Indian urban immigration has put between 33% and 50% of all Indians in urban settings where they invariably are subjected to an initial cultural shock. Leaving the reservation to improve their socioeconomic status, Indians find urban adjustment extremely difficult. The Anglo culture is inherently opposed to the "Indian Way", for it emphasizes competitiveness, individualism, and conflict. While Indians differ considerably from tribe to tribe, in an urban setting they seek one another out and assert an identity which is distinctly Indian and different from the Anglo identity. In order to establish a reasonable relationship with the Indian, the Anglo must learn to recognize and accept the Indian's cultural differences. Among the more important cultural differences to be recognized are the Indian's: dislike of friendly imposition; need for passive observance prior to social participation; soft spoken manner; subtle rather than overt expression of friendship; reluctance to bargain, argue, or otherwise prove himself; high esteem for privacy and non-interference; identification with the group rather than the individual; tolerant sense of time; and subtle physical expression. Among the Indian cultural practices most often retained in the urban setting are: Indian foods and languages; modest clothing; sharing; tolerance; pow-wow attendance; and trips back home for spiritual rejuvenation. (JC)

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# THE AMERICAN INDIAN

## *a very private people*

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*The cover design is a contribution by Iva Carrico, (Chippewa-Cree). Mrs. Carrico has encompassed in a sacred shield symbols for life-giving elements, for aspiration, growth and reaching out. These include the sun and rain, the tendril, the eye of things unknown and the horizon which stretches from this world to the next.*

## AMERICAN INDIANS

### A VERY PRIVATE PEOPLE

American Indians are a minority people characterized as "quiet" or "silent." Only Indians possess so intense a sense of privacy and practice so pervading a code of non-interference. This cultural contrast between Indians and non-Indians may either be a barrier which grows with each encounter, or it may enrich both groups.

With the intent of aiding intergroup awareness, we describe here some aspects of "the Indian Way," the culture and style of most Indian newcomers to urban life. Urban Indians who are not newcomers practice "the Indian Way" in varying degrees. (For Indians who have integrated or have been assimilated into the wider community "the Indian Way" may be a part of their personal or family histories.)

We do not imply that Indians are all alike; they are not. There are hundreds of tribes, perhaps 100 different languages, diverse experiences, and individual personalities.

The reader must be trusted to accept this information for reference and not as "instant understanding."

## How Many Indians Live in Los Angeles County? In Which Areas?

Most people are surprised to learn that Los Angeles has the largest urban Indian population in the nation. The 1970 Census reported 24,509 Indians in the County; Indians estimate between 45,000 and 60,000. The Indian population is so mobile, moving between city and country, and from one city location to another, that there can be no accurate count.

Between a third and a half of all American Indians now live in urban settings. Some have taken advantage of the Bureau of Indian Affairs' controversial program for relocation to urban settings; others move on their own, in search of a better life.

One reason the Indian's presence is not better known is the common inability of the majority population to recognize him as an Indian. An Aleut from Alaska might be mistaken for an Asian; a fairskinned, lanky Sioux for Anglo, or a husky Hopi for a Latin.

No one community here serves as the "port of entry" to Indians. They locate in scattered residential clusters near training schools, jobs, or friends - some in the Pico-Union area, Bell, Bell Gardens, Cudahy, Huntington Park, Burbank, Pacoima, San Fernando or Newhall.

## Why do Indians Leave the Reservations?

Life on reservations or former reservations is bare existence. Most reservations have little in the way of jobs, schools, plumbing, opportunities or future. Some Indian 10-year-olds spend the school year at government boarding schools 50 miles from home, because public schools are not available. Reservation housing may mean a dirt floor, communal outhouse, water well miles distant, open fire for heat and light, with only cactus, shrubbery or cow chips for fuel.

Indians in comparison to every other racial or ethnic group in the nation:

Die youngest*

Get the least education*

Suffer most infant deaths*

Have the least income*

Are most unemployed*

Have the worst housing*

Do Indians get payments from the Federal Government?

The Federal government does not provide Indian persons with an income for life. There are no payments which result simply and solely from being born American Indian.

Where there are cash Federal payments to Indian persons, such payments involve circumstances in addition to American Indian ancestry. For example, some Indians receive payments as a result of treaty terms; or in payment for Indian lands which were taken or are held in trust by the government; or as participants in an educational or vocational program. The vast majority of American Indians receive little or no such income.

What are the Prospects for Economic Development of Reservations?

Reservations were set aside out of the path of "progress" on land with no known mineral wealth or agricultural or industrial potential. Reservations do have an abundance of land, space, and time. These, along with the Indian and their culture lend themselves to tourism, and that has become the most active source of income.

**These statements still hold true for the national Indian averages, in spite of the gains made by the urban Indian population.*

There has been considerable publicity concerning the few tribes with resources and capital to develop those resources. These are the exceptions. There are also a few reservation industries owned and operated by outside interests. Typically they employ Indians only at low-level jobs. Manufacturers are understandably reluctant to locate where even water and power sources are lacking or unpredictable, and where the labor supply is untried.

Is the Adjustment to Urban Living Difficult?

Urban Indians have traded the outdoors and a familiar home community for a better future through education and work. By and large the bargain has paid off. Indians who have stayed in the city are making gains in education, employment and housing. But urban life also includes pollution, congestion, rush, complexity, callousness and the loosening of family, tribal and cultural ties.

The jolt of sudden transplant from a small community into a metropolis is bewildering and very hard to take. Some don't adjust; they return home for a time, until desperation moves them to try again. Those who stay seek the company of other Indians at known gathering places. In the city it becomes less important what tribe a person is from, and more important that he is another Indian.

How Do Indians Feel About Non-Indians and How Can I Convey Goodwill?

Because almost all urban Indians are English-speaking, non-Indians tend to assume that the cultural differences are limited to food, clothing, music and crafts. If that were so, interaction would come easy. But Indians are so different from white men that the harder whites try to be "friendly" the more likely they are to offend. Imagine a white man urging an Indian to join a pingpong game. The Indian resists being "imposed upon" and indicates it by remaining silent. The harder

the white man urges, the more the Indian "withdraws," looking away, and finally getting up and walking away. The white man thinks the Indian doesn't respond. What he does not understand is that the Indian did respond, "the Indian Way." Or the white man may have tried to set the Indian at ease by demonstrating his own clumsiness at the game, to assure the Indian that expertise isn't expected. But, rather than be reassured, the Indian is embarrassed for the white man. "The Indian Way" does not include trial and error. "The Indian Way"is to remain still, observe, assess the situation, and participate only when one has prepared himself.

When Indians speak, they tend to speak very softly. So softly that a non-Indian in their company must be more attentive and alert than he is accustomed to being if he is to hear the conversation. Often, non-Indians will hear only a murmur, except for occasional bursts of laughter. Still another reason for an Indian's reluctance to converse with non-Indians may be an English language handicap. Not only has he had less and poorer education, a tribal language may be more natural for him.

An Indian's expressions of friendship and appreciation are subtle. Friends often acknowledge one another with just a smile and a nod. A non-Indian may indicate friendliness by smiling, nodding, and then waiting for the Indian to set the pace. It should go without saying that casual familiarities such as the free use of "honey" or "dear" are offensive.

The time needed to build a relationship will seem slow to the non-Indian. Even the pace of conversation is slow. Non-Indians may become impatient, but the Indian lives with time, he is not its subject.

"The Indian Way" of remaining still can be quite literal. Physical expressions are just as subtle as the verbal expressions. Indians tend to move quietly, carefully, and to keep a distance between themselves and others. If you want to express respect for the Indian culture, limit touching to a handshake and avoid "crowding" close.

Past encounters with whites have built up within Indians a distrust of non-Indians. Any person with slight knowledge of American history should understand this. Yet, in spite of discrimination and humiliation, Indians are not inclined to prove that their worth is as great as someone else's - that is the white man's way. Indians feel no need to strategize, to argue, or to bargain their way into higher station - that is the white man's way.

Indians place the highest value on privacy and non-interference. The integrity and self-determination of each person is preserved above all else. It is wrong to probe into another personality or to impose one's opinion upon another - even in the most caring way or with the best of intentions. Such simple statements as: "Check with X Company for a job, they're hiring welders," or "Why don't you like the blue shirt?" or "Don't believe the newspaper reports" may be misunderstood and unwelcomed. Privately or publicly, the "outgoing," "protective," "persuasive" person is foreign.

This sense of privacy and non-interference is reflected in a cooperative group life. Authoritarianism is not acceptable to Indians. An Indian leader is not the boss, he is the spokesperson.

In reference to themselves, most Indians prefer the term "Indian." Only a few (notably Alaskans and Canadians) favor "Native American."

What Indian Cultural Practices are most often Retained by Urban Indians?

The Indian home may serve Indian foods, including fry bread.

Some families, in addition to English, use an Indian language, and give their children Indian names which are not to be spoken. In some tribes, nicknames identify a child as a first son, or second daughter, etc.

In keeping with the Indian code of non-competitiveness, clothes are modest. It is unbecoming by Indian standards to call attention to oneself.

Sharing is a way of life. "Who owns it?" is not as important as "Who needs it?" When good fortune comes, it is shared with the group.

Indian tolerance, mentioned earlier, may lead to the inclusion of elements and practices of both Christian and tribal religions, and both modern and traditional medicines and cures.

Many urban Indians attend pow-wows sponsored by Indian organizations. Dancing to drum and song is a common denominator linking all Indians. Pow-wows attract all ages, all tribes, all interests.

Other kinds of recreation favored by Indians are most often outdoors, or related to "back home." Indian athletic leagues for men and women are among the most firmly established institutions and attract many participants. Hometown newspapers and Indian publications are favorite leisure reading materials, supplementing as active "Indian grapevine."

Trips "back home" for ceremonies, pow-wows, church "sings," funerals, and to restore the spirit are common, even among the very poor. Such trips are not "vacations" planned long in advance, saved for, and considered a leisure activity. Rather, they fill a deep need. It is important to get there, by whatever means, at whatever sacrifice. Such trips, we suspect, are most frequent among the recent immigrants to the city.

"The Indian Way" is very different from the way of most of us. Through repeated contact the Indian has become aware of the majority culture's way. We do well to become aware of "the Indian Way."

This booklet is provided as an educational service by:

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